



State, Society & Governance in Melanesia

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Working with What We've Got: The Asset-Based Approach

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This In Brief discusses problems with encouraging entrepreneurialism as a way to solve poverty and reports on what rural women believe will improve their livelihood — specifically co-operatives, asset-based approaches and sustainable partnerships. It is based on interviews conducted with women from Menyamya District in Morobe Province, October 2015.

The 'Start Your Own Business' Fever

During the Papua New Guinea Women's Forum in March 2015, held at Port Moresby's Crown Plaza, I observed that more women attended the economic development breakout sessions than the democracy and governance, health, or education themed sessions. In one of the sessions on small-medium enterprise and financial inclusion, the room was filled to its capacity with some women sitting on the floor and in the corridor. Moderator Desmond Yaninen, then CEO of the National Development Bank (NDB) Investments, was the target of all questions relating to loan and investment plans.

The primary hindrance to women starting their own business or project idea is the lack of capital, which the NDB tries to address with its microfinance loans. However, many PNG women in rural areas are [illiterate](#) and cannot complete lengthy loan applications. Co-operatives are seen to bridge this gap. Women's interest groups (for example, agriculture, coffee, or sewing) convene to form associations and elect executives to manage the finance and bank-related paperwork, thereby lifting that burden from the other members of the co-operative. This allows the less-educated members of the co-operative to access capital without the stress of tedious paperwork. Although aimed at including grassroots women in entrepreneurial paths, in practice co-operatives often leave members disappointed.

The Problem with Co-Operatives

The management and operation of women co-operatives in contemporary PNG is an interesting area that needs more research. However, interviews with women in Menyamya District show that many women believe co-operatives do not work.

There are macro and micro problems associated with activities in the operation of co-operatives. At the micro level, women in Menyamya District shared examples of cases where one or two members of a co-operative, usually an executive, would desert the group with all their monies or capital-making equipment (that is, sewing machine or coffee pulping machine). Morobe's Provincial Women's council representative reflected it was:

human nature, eventually only one or two people will benefit, that is why people here do not believe in co-operatives.

In other macro cases, when small-scale fresh food farmers form a co-operative to find markets, they are confronted with issues that even as group they cannot overcome without making substantial losses in their business endeavours. Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research and PNG Government research into the fresh produce supply chains in the PNG Highlands learnt that there is no point in consolidation for PNG fresh food markets (Spriggs, Chambers & Omot, 2013:9). Moreover, the industry is not developed to the extent where there can be a smooth transition from farms to markets. In particular, poor road conditions and travel insecurities increase the expenditure for farmers. Fresh food co-operative members end up losing money rather than making profit. In such circumstances, women are further disadvantaged because their male counterparts are likely to take the lead in issues of transport security and cost price negotiations (ibid.).

Asset-Based Approach and Sustainable Partnerships

With such existing challenges, women (and men) are asking for a different approach to aid in improving their livelihood.

An asset-based approach to community development, or in this case an improved livelihood, is one that utilises community assets and capacities to identify and solve their own problems. For rural communities in PNG, this approach seems appropriate as it harnesses the community's strengths and assets.

An example of this method is Care International's Integrated Community Development Project, which has been in operation in three remote districts (Gumine, Obura-Wonenara, and Menyamya), in PNG since 2014. In this particular project, Care International community officers have been working with local leaders, both men and women, at the ward level, assisting them in designing their own ward and local level government plans with the ethos of participatory community development. All of the women leaders interviewed expressed much gratitude towards this initiative, reflecting that they now felt more equipped and confident to carry out their duties as local leaders.

With improving their livelihood, Menyamya women called for the government and non-government organisations (NGOs) to meet them where they are, working with their existing skill set and knowledge. A representative from Morobe Province Women's Council said that:

sometimes women themselves do not know what they want or what would really be beneficial for them in the long run, there is a disconnect in how they think and what they spent most of their time doing.

She gave the example of farming skills and nutrition, explaining that the average rural woman is adept at gardening, so it is more feasible to introduce educational program(s) on insect control or improving irrigation, which would improve their livelihood, rather than programs that teach sewing or 'start your own business' courses. She also mentioned how initiatives on nutrition and hygiene can benefit women by enhancing their health and that of their families, especially in such a remote location where aid posts are not nearby. She surmised, 'if we can improve the little things then we have done well for the women'.

Menyamya women also called for more government and church or NGO partnerships, stating that most government projects do not last long: 'maintenance seems to be the problem everywhere in PNG'. Hence partnerships are encouraged to aid local governments in areas where they lack expertise and to ensure accountability and proper project implementation. As one of Morobe Province's most remote and challenging districts for service delivery, Menyamya is fortunate to have Care International's Integrated Community Development Project operating in partnership with the local level government. Furthermore, this program can be a pilot for other government departments and NGO partnerships that would not only ensure effective implementation but would support the local human resource.

Author Notes

Theresa Meki is a PhD student with SSGM. She is currently in PNG working on her research into women's participation in electoral politics in PNG and Melanesia.

Endnotes

1. Most interviews were conducted in October 2015 as part of a Joint District Assessment, by Care International PNG and SSGM, and personal observation at the 2015 PNG Women's Forum on the 9–11 March 2015

References

- Spriggs, J., B. Chambers and N. Omot 2013. Towards Socioeconomic Change in the Fresh-Produce Supply Chains of the Papua New Guinea Highlands. *Agricultural Research in Papua New Guinea* 9.

